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## French Settlements in Floyd County

By ALICE L. GREEN, New Albany, Indiana

### ST. MARY'S-OF-THE-KNOBS

Of the several buffalo trails crossing the State of Indiana the best developed and most popular led from the salt-licks of Central Kentucky, fording the Ohio River at the Falls, thence over the Floyd county hills, northwest across Southern Indiana to Vincennes and onward to the prairies of Illinois. Over this trail, in many places wide enough for a wagon road, it is said, came the Indians the fur traders, the hunters and trappers, the missionaries and lastly the pioneers.

New Albany, laid out in 1813 just below the Ohio Falls, was a low-lying, very unhealthful village. Malaria, chills, and fevers were the common lot of all. There was a heavy growth of timber along the creeks running through the level stretch upon which the village was located. Much of the land was so low that it was subject to annual overflow. This half-marsh, covered with fallen and decayed timber, caused much sickness among the early settlers. So, it was no uncommon thing for the "older settlers" to advise the "newcomers" to move back among the hills surrounding this valley near the river, where they would be out of the reach of floods and impending sickness.

Soon after the war of 1812, emigrants came, in ever increasing numbers, to the Ohio Falls country. Among these were several French families from Lorraine who floated down the Ohio river; and upon landing at New Albany, and being informed of its unhealthful condition, turned to the hills northwest of the village. These hills were covered with the forest primeval, and the only means of climbing them, doubtless, was by following the old Buffalo trail, long before abandoned by its makers. This probably led the French emigrants north of the present Paoli pike, for they settled on Little Indian creek, some two or three miles north of the present village of Mooresville (Floyd Knob P. O.), and about six miles from New Albany. The exact location of the old trail is not known. It may have been nearer the line of the Paoli pike, from

which it was easy for the settlers to follow the course of the creek. Here they laid the nucleus for the flourishing community known today as St. Mary's-of-the-Knobs.

Among these earliest settlers (they were proud to be settlers, and not squatters) was one Thomas Piers—often called Pierce—an Irishman, who came in 1816. He was a man of considerable influence, a surveyor as well as a farmer. On his farm the first Catholic church was organized by Father Abel of Bardstown, Kentucky. A log church was built in 1824. This church was replaced by a brick building in 1836, and located about a mile north of the first structure. However, the graveyard around the first church continued to be held sacred for many years, and has only recently become a part of the cultivated fields. In 1824 there was no Catholic church in New Albany, and the small congregation out on the Piers farm was recognized as a mission of Bardstown, the priests coming from that town to conduct services for the settlers. At that time the bishop lived at Vincennes. Constant communication was kept up between the churches at Bardstown and Vincennes along the old Buffalo trail. As the priests traveled through the state they made it a point to visit all Catholic families and settlements. Thus the little church on the Floyd county hills had many passing visitors from its earliest days.

Many Frenchmen and a few Irish, led by the ties of kindred, language, and religion, followed the first hardy pioneers. Among these were the names: Vernia (then spelled Vernier), Albert, Banet, Spikert, Jacquot, Pierette, Brevet, Peay, Perrine, Quencez, Beacond, Richards, Pierson, Bedan (spelled Bedaine), Didat, Journey, Martin, James (Jarques), Wey, Receveur, Choulet, Christian, Marguet, Tripure and many others.

The best known of the Irish settlers in the neighborhood were the Byrn, Duffy and Coleman families. John Coleman was one of the best educated men in the colony, and became the first schoolmaster. He was also a justice of the peace, and tried the few cases.

These early settlers were frugal and industrious. They brought with them their occupations of the "old country," and lived the simple peasant life of the fatherland. The older people, even within the memories of those now living, wore wooden shoes (sabots), and burned their "fagots." The settlement prospered, and the farms grew apace. One of my family remembers seeing the women of those "early days" mounted astride horses coming to market with

the fruits of their fields in bags across the horses' backs. In New Albany they exchanged their produce for such articles as sugar and coffee, mounted their steeds, and rode leisurely away to their hilly homes. As they cleared their fields for cultivation, they used the timber and hoop-poles for making barrels. Thus early the cooper-age business became one of the leading industries of the community. They sold these barrels in Louisville, hauling them in immense wagons built for that purpose. A descendant of one of the early French families, a woman not yet in middle life, has told me that she recalls four large "cooper shops" in her immediate neighborhood, when she was a child. The merry sound of the hammer was heard in all directions. Now they are all gone. The clearing away of the forests, and the introduction of factory-made barrels at a much cheaper price caused the decline of this oldtime industry.

Another paying industry of the early French settlement was the stone quarries which gave occupation to a goodly number of men. These men had to be strong, robust, and fearless, for the work was considered quite dangerous. But the boy who secured the job of carrying drinking water from a near-by well or spring to the "quarrymen," as they were called, thought he had an easy task indeed, and there was great competition for the same, as the occupation gave much time for rest and reflection. Logs were in plenty from which he could shy stones at passing birds, and gaze at the beautiful scenery, a panorama of hills, valleys, and distant towns spread out before him; and no doubt he took advantage of the situation. The limestone rocks, after being blasted from the hill-sides, were drilled by hand into huge blocks, and hauled in strong wagons, called "rock wagons" to Louisville, where they assisted largely in building that beautiful city.

These occupations of farming, cooperage and quarrying created a social caste system among the early settlers, the two former being considered much more genteel than the last named. This community, known as "St. Mary's," early became one of the most flourishing in the county and remains so to the present day. Many descendants of those pioneers are still living in the county and State, and they are everywhere honored and respected citizens. And the church so early founded at St. Mary's was like the community a strong and influential society. It grew with the growth of the settlement, and strengthened with its strength, until it is now one of the largest of the State outside the cities.

The church at St. Mary's had no resident priest until 1835, when Father Neyron came to them. This Rev. Father deserves more than passing mention. He was a soldier of Napoleon's army, also a surgeon of remarkable ability. Coming to this country early in the nineteenth century, he became a priest, and his name is closely linked with the early history of New Albany, to which place he came when the first Catholic church was organized. He was a public spirited citizen as well as a religious worker, and he was ever ready with his surgeon's skill to help those in need. He worked hand in hand with his followers, teaching them many useful things. He built churches with his own means, and "healed the sick without money or price." An elderly merchant in New Albany relates that as a mere boy he used to accompany Father Neyron from the village church—after early mass—across the fields and up the hills to St. Mary's where the Rev. Father would hold services at 10 a. m., returning to New Albany immediately afterward, always afoot. So it is easily seen why the name of Father Neyron is held in blessed memory by those old settler folk.

#### "FRENCH CREEK" SETTLEMENT

Southwest of New Albany lies a mass of hills, picturesque, rugged and barren in many places. There is but little level land, and the country is wild and rough in general. The main road through this part of the county, winding, curving and doubling on itself among these beautiful hills, is called the Budd road in honor of Col. Gilbert Budd, an influential English pioneer, who settled early in that community. A French colony, led by a missionary priest, whose name has long since passed into oblivion, settled among these hills about 1830 or thereabouts. They may have been led in that direction in search of higher, healthier ground, as in the case of the first settlement, or the hills may have reminded them of their far-away homes. At any rate they called their settlement "Porrentruy" from the name of the native canton of many of them. On the books of "La Societe Francaise" of New Albany, incorporated by act of Assembly in 1855, the division known as "Porrentruy" is formally entered. Quite a number of these settlers were "Belgian" French, and a few Swiss were mixed with them. Among these hills they planted vineyards, vegetable gardens, and orchards. The people were honest and industrious and for years the colony

prospered. In all about forty families settled within a radius of a few miles up and down French creek, a creek that rushes and tumbles down the hills to the Ohio, and marked the heart of the settlement, its main thoroughfare as it were.

Being much nearer the town than the settlement at St. Mary's, the people attended church at New Albany. It is said that Father Neyron persuaded them to come to him rather than build a church of their own. Once each month the good Father was accustomed to go down among these parishioners, and hold vesper services for them. A resident of New Albany, who lived in this settlement when a boy, relates that on Sunday the older people would drive the mile or two to New Albany to church, while the young people preferred to walk, every laddie with his lassie, and to make the trip as long as possible. It is said that when the community was at its prime, about 1850-60, there were at least a hundred young people in the neighborhood who enjoyed many good times together.

Among the names prominent in the community were Verone, Hubler, Bee, Pierard, Hubbard, Volzer, Marque, Prenat, Boll, Bezot, Gony, Jordan, Bruet, Mousty, Goniât, Graniger, Bezy, Echobert and Beuchât. Several of the oldest settlers had been soldiers of Napoleon, and never tired of telling stories of their early adventures.

Several causes may have led to the downfall of the colony. The land is steep and sterile, and farming does not prosper. There was no church with a resident priest to hold the people together. Many of the young folks, influenced by the spirit of the times, went to the neighboring towns to work. Many of the best families moved to other parts of the state, several settled at Vincennes. And, again, intermarriage with the incoming Americans resulted in the deterioration of the pure French stock.

During the '80's and '90's, the Budd Road French Settlement became a most notorious place for evil doings. Many murders were committed, and the spirit of feuds was rampant. It was with much difficulty that the county authorities were able to suppress this lawlessness.

However, at present, a generation has grown up that is hard-working and law-abiding. The old "reign of terror" has passed away with the older generation. Likewise most of the old landmarks of the early French settlement have disappeared. Here and there are found the remains of an old vineyard on some steep hill-

side. In one place an old chimney looms above the neighboring scrub-oaks, a mute witness of the past. On another hillside a pile of stones, mostly covered with vines and lichens, is all that remains of a huge bake oven, the common property of several neighbors. Here and there a disused well, its sweep and bucket long since fallen to decay, marks the spot of an old French home. These, together with a few names such as "French Creek," "French Creek School," are all that remain of the once flourishing and picturesque community.

It seems the irony of fate that these two French settlements—"St. Mary's" and the "Budd Road"—in the same small county, and within a few miles of each other, should have had such different endings, one to have prospered with the years, and the other to have gone to pieces utterly. Be it as it may, they have added much to the interest and romance of the early history of Floyd county. True to their native characteristics, they give a dash, and a bit of color to our early local history that would be entirely lacking without them.